

Study space assistants: the Royal Holloway experience



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Past experience has shown that the management of the library environment during the exam period has always been a challenging time of year at Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL). Various approaches have been piloted, but these have not been entirely successful for users or staff involved in this activity.

As at all institutions, during this very busy period study space is at a premium. Therefore, looking at different approaches to preventing the reserving of seats and the management of noise and behavioural issues is key to the success of maintaining a safe and secure environment conducive to study, learning and research.

In Spring/Summer 2012, following discussions with customer service colleagues, it was agreed

that the best solution, budget permitting, would be to employ staff specifically to manage the exam period at Bedford Library, the bigger and busier of the two libraries at Royal Holloway. Further discussions were held with the library's management team and a bid for additional funding was put forward and approved.

As this was a new role to RHUL, documentation for recruitment was quickly produced, along with the requirements of the role, activities and procedures. Two Study Space Assistants (SSAs) were appointed and in place from 23 April until 25 May 2012. Each worked a four-hour Monday – Friday shift.

MANAGEMENT OF THE LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT

The employment of the SSAs proved to have a very positive influence on the environment and users at Bedford Library during this very busy period. Not only did it free up permanent staff time to continue with their routine work, it also provided a consistent approach to noise patrols, which in the past were very ad hoc. The personal approach to the management of users reserving seats/spaces proved highly successful and was a vast improvement on the old yellow and red card system, which was inconsistent and relied on many staff volunteers to carry out hourly noise patrols, with the distribution of the yellow/red cards and removal of users' belongings from unoccupied study spaces. If the user's belongings were left on desks unattended, but no user was present, a yellow card would be left informing the user that the desk would be checked in one hour.





If it remained vacant, library staff would replace the yellow card with a red notice informing the user that their belongings had been removed and that they would need to contact the helpdesk staff to retrieve them. The user would need to give the desk number and describe the contents of their belongings before items were returned.

From a staff perspective, the removal of users' belongings was not ideal, and in some cases where laptops were involved, the desk remained untouched. Not only was this a time-consuming approach to the management of space, it was also disruptive to users in the vicinity. In many cases the cards would be removed by friends and peers and be thrown away or tucked in the shelving only to be found later in the year.

STUDY SPACE ASSISTANTS

The SSAs' daily activities included: regular noise patrols; reminding users of rules; management of smoking outside the Library entrance (see below); and clearing study spaces, which provided consistency in the management of the library environment. 'Space to study' head counts were also incorporated into the timetable of the SSAs, thus freeing up time of staff in the library's administration team. ('Space to study' is a RHUL initiative coordinated by the library and students' union that seeks to provide and badge additional non-library space for study on site at busy times of the year.)

The friendly, approachable (but firm) manner demonstrated by the SSAs enabled them to build a good rapport with users. On many occasions the SSAs were asked to find study spaces for users and were told that this role had helped people greatly in facilitating their study. Personal interaction with students played a significant part of the SSAs' role. Consistent patrols made noise control easier as users understood that their actions would have consequences.

COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

Library supervisors maintained daily contact with the SSAs. The helpdesk wiki provided an excellent communication tool, along with the daily reports provided by the SSAs, thus ensuring that any concerns/problems were dealt with right away. It also ensured that staff were up to speed with earlier events when taking over a shift.

Although a hand-over period was not built into the working pattern, the SSAs always communicated with each other to ensure continuity throughout the day. Both agreed that the 4-hour shift pattern worked well, and that any more would be too tiring on busy days. A key element to the system working was that the SSAs were recognisable, so users would know whom to approach if necessary. The employment of additional assistants would have reduced this benefit and risked a lack of consistency.

At the final feedback meeting, both SSAs agreed that despite working independently, they felt part

of the team and felt highly supported throughout the entire process. Both indicated that they would be happy to take on this role again in 2013, a clear indication of the success of the new system.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

Having to deal with angry or stressed students was very rare, and such situations were always resolved. A recent course on conflict resolution, involving all RHUL library staff, proved enormously helpful. However, concern was raised about the agreed system in place should a user refuse to cooperate. For instance, what were the penalties for bad behaviour, would users be asked to study elsewhere or would a supervisor remove the user's borrowing rights? This was discussed at the last meeting with the SSAs when it was agreed that the procedure for dealing with escalating noise behavioural problems should be more clearly defined for 2013.

SMOKING OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY

The problem of people smoking close to buildings, particularly the Bedford Library, had been raised directly with the Principal by students earlier in the year. Managing this was incorporated into the responsibilities of the SSAs, and as a consequence the number of students smoking directly outside the front door reduced during the exam period. The habits of smokers proved quite varied; on some days, there were none while on others there were many. This was attributed to two factors, the first being that if one person does it then others feel that they can follow suit, the second being the weather. When it is raining student smokers

always try to get as close to the building as possible, and do not seem to realise that they could smoke under cover elsewhere (namely around the steps leading to other campus buildings) without inconveniencing others. The outcome of these observations has been to make the rules (and reasons for them) very clear to students at the start of the academic year, and to propose to the Health and Safety Team the need for a smoking shelter.

2NOISY TEXT SYSTEM

The SSAs also provided valuable feedback on the 2NOISY texting service for reporting noise issues in the library. This highly visible service was introduced during the exam period; it was easy to set up, low cost and repurposed equipment (ipod touches) already in stock. Although it was a good concept, which students used, in practice it could have worked a lot better. Both SSAs commented that they had not been able to deal with a problem while it was actually happening.

This may have been down to a delay in the message arriving or possibly to its being missed, as it was not always possible to check the inbox every five minutes. Recommendations for future use include the sending of texts to the library helpdesk with a sound emitted on arrival. This could also be done via email, which may be quicker and cheaper than text, and may provide a better option. If this were done in addition to the text alerts sent to the SSA, there would be no chance of its being missed.





GROUP STUDY ROOMS

The SSAs reported that group study rooms were often empty during peak times; therefore, it would be worth considering whether study rooms should be bookable during the 2013 exam period. The problem of noise in these rooms was highlighted, since the students may have felt them to be separate from the rest of the floor.

QUIET PERIODS

Towards the end of the contract period the SSAs were less busy: a reduction in the number of students in the library inevitably meant that noise and desk reservations were reduced. Therefore, the SSAs were given additional tasks, including shelf tidying and checking reading lists. Additional tasks have already been identified for 2013, including shelving and the use of an iPad to deal with wider enquires such as stock location.

PRINT PUBLICITY

The distribution of leaflets including a code of conduct agreed with the student's union was very successful. The SSAs made a few suggestions for improvements to the leaflets for 2013, including the introduction of a second leaflet focusing specifically on 'clearing away of unattended belongings', reducing the amount of text on the leaflets and highlighting the most important information in bold.

CONCLUSION

The employment of the SSAs proved to be a most beneficial and successful approach to the management of the library environment during the busy exam period. The personal approach to the management of seat/space reservation proved highly successful and was a great improvement on the previous yellow and red card system. The SSAs contributed to a much better atmosphere for the students to work in, all of which provided a positive experience for RHUL library users. Positive feedback was also received from staff/student committees, who have asked for this initiative to be repeated next year. Lessons have been learnt about library service in general and it is proposed that for 2013 the SSAs should be in place at the start of the exam period and employed for seven rather than five days a week.